Imagine a society not of individuals, but only of relations. The idea here is that humans’ only social existence is their communications with each other. Yet societies are not closed systems of communication but open systems that observe, learn, and thereby remain self-reproducing (or autopoietic) through ongoing operations within their environments. Every observational act entails drawing a distinction between a marked (or noticed) part and an unmarked part. If the system tries to observe both sides of any distinction, it is faced with the paradox that distinctions preclude observation of their unmarked parts. Thus when observing itself, a system will tend not to notice its environment—the unmarked part of its being. Yet (as Giddens and Beck attest) in ignoring their environments societies place themselves at risk. Luhmann argues that self-observation need not be risky if it is of a second order (i.e., if it comprises observation of the reasons for the system’s ongoing operations, as opposed to the media’s provision of first-order observations of the system’s operations themselves). Second-order observation involves noting *différence* between society and its environment, and drawing a new distinction within this environment on the basis of which the system can learn and choose operations less risky to its survival. Such ongoing deconstruction may be the only means whereby societies can remain open systems, and thus able to mitigate the risks of the postmodern age.